

"WHY DO YOU WEEP? WHOM DO YOU SEEK?"

INTRODUCTION Today's sermon concludes the Lenten series of sermons based on "Questions Jesus Asked".

It's interesting to note that in the closing chapters of the Four Gospels, Jesus fares better at the hands of women than he does at the hands of men. To say this is not to capitulate to women's lib, but to recognize a fact. The point can be simply put: women were last at the cross and first at the empty tomb.

DEVELOPMENT One of those who distinguished herself at the death and the resurrection of Jesus was Mary of Magdala. Early in his ministry, Jesus had cast out seven devils from this woman. Thus delivered from some undisclosed malady of mind or body, Mary devoted her life without remainder to the Master's service. We can understand then why His death should pierce her heart and plunge her into grief.

On the morning of the world's first Easter, Mary went to the place where Jesus had been buried out of love and respect. The words that tell of her experience will be read in thousands of churches around the world today. They begin:

"Now on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb".

(John 20: 1)

What followed is now a matter of public domain. She ran to alert Peter and John. Those two worthies hastened to investigate for themselves, and then returned to their homes. As for Mary, she went back to the garden, stood near the tomb, and wept.

Presently Jesus appeared in a form that she did not recognize. "Why do you weep", He asked. "Whom do you seek?" (John 20:15)

At this point we are ushered into a recognition scene - unsurpassed in its feeling and tenderness.

"Supposing Him to be the gardener, she said to Him, 'Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where You have laid Him, and I will take Him away'. Jesus said to her, 'Mary'. She turned and said to Him, 'Rabboni'".

WHY DO YOU WEEP "Why do you weep?" The question may seem unnecessary. Perhaps impertinent. Even a little cruel. "Why do you weep?"

Yet we know now the wisdom of encouraging one another to verbalize our emotions. There is therapy here. Why are you happy? Why are you angry? Why are you nervous? Why do you weep?

It is possible to be over-worried about the wrong things. Where did I hear recently about a man who determined to worry only one day a week? For some reason he chose Wednesday. Rather than spoil all the other days with worry, he would concentrate all of his foreboding on that one day. He reported that many

of the things about which he might have worried vanished from his mind by Wednesday. How true. So many things we worry about never come to pass. Then too, it's

It's sometimes the case with grief that self-pity plays too dominant a role. "Why do you weep, Mary?" Are you sad for yourself? Sad for the world? Sad for me?

IT WAS EARLY AND IN A GARDEN It's significant to me to note that Mary wept early in the morning and in a garden. It was a calming time of the day and the place was such as to set the heart at ease. But Mary could not find peace.

I'm a morning person myself and can only say that Mary's grief must have been totally unremitting if she could weep even as the sun was coming up.

New York City never looks lovelier to me than it does early in the day. There's a sense of cleanliness and newness to everything one sees. It's one thing to go to bed at night sick and brokenhearted, but to rise in the morning in that state is deeply serious.

Mary not only had the morning, she also had a garden. Yes, the dew was still on the roses. Birds filled the air with song; yet, her grief was not eased or helped. A woman once sat down to pay tribute to the gardens of the world in these words,

"The kiss of the sun for pardon,
The song of the birds for mirth.
One is nearer God's heart in a garden,
Than anywhere else on earth."

We dare not burden nature so, or overly romanticize the out-of-doors. For neither the Springtime nor the morning, nor the garden could minister to this woman's sorrow. How distressing it is that the miracle of Easter is so frequently confused with the agricultural miracle of Spring.

A youngster some time back attended a sunrise service somewhere in Westchester County. A report from one of the papers asked him what Easter meant to him. The teenager replied by saying, "I think of Easter as the renewal of Spring....I'm so glad it comes at the right time of the year.". How wrong can we be. Easter in the Southern Hemisphere comes at a different time of year! The rites of spring do not give meaning to the resurrection of Jesus. It is the resurrection that gives new meaning to the rites of Spring.

WHY DO YOU WEEP "Why do you weep? Whom do you seek? Mary wept because her world had come to an end. O, her necessities would be cared for. No problem there. She would go on existing. That wasn't the point.

What Mary needed, and what every human being needs, is a sense of significance. A sense that one's life means something -- that it's going somewhere -- that it has value. Erich Frank, a contemporary philosopher, put it this way:

"Man's whole life is a struggle to gain existence,
an effort to achieve substantially, so that he may
not have lived in vain and vanished like a shadow."

Thus, we find it necessary to give ourselves to some pursuit.

For some, it may be the pursuit of pleasure. I'm significant because I consume. Somewhere in my travels I picked up a matchbook that proudly bears on its cover these words, "Eat and Drink With Us to the Last Hurrah". Pleasure trips when unconnected to a higher vision are like nothing more than riding a carousel in a graveyard.

Sometimes in the quest for significance we like to tinker with history and imagine ourselves having an effect on world events, "as though society were intended for nothing else but to be mended". And so we work hard to get one set of rascals out and another set of rascals in. I'm significant because I'm busy. I'm moving. I'm in motion. I'm on the run.

As Americans, our most persistent pursuit is the pursuit of wealth. I am significant. Look what I have acquired. Judge me by my acquisitions, for my acquisitions are an extension of myself. Probably no one in recent years embodied this misguided passion more tragically than Howard Hughes. Max Lerner of the Post wrote a prophetic comment on this mysterious recluse at the time of his death that I clipped and put in my sermon file.

"If so much of what Americans value can end with a naked man, helpless on a stretcher, broken out in sores, covered with a yellow sheet - owning everything, enjoying nothing, using everyone, loved by and loving no one -- what then endures?"

BACK TO MARY Back to Mary Magdalene. Mary, you see, had found her significance in Jesus of Nazareth. And now that He was gone her world had come apart. She had made a total investment of her life in Him and that investment had been wiped out. She may have longed for death herself. If the media had interviewed her, she might have said,

"I feel that something has broken with me...ⁱⁿ on which my life has rested...that I now have nothing left to hold on to....my life has stopped..."

But then, to her everlasting joy, she made the discovery that we celebrate today. It is all gathered up for us in the touching exchange of two proper names, "Mary". "Rabboni".

Jesus lives. Jesus has a future. It was not all over. It was Caesar's world that was dead and under judgement. Not the world of the crucified, Risen Christ. Mary's sense of significance was reborn; her relationships to Christ was reborn....restored.

And for her as a person it meant a life of constant growth and new adventure. She was to learn a new way of relating to Him. She was to learn a new title for Him - no longer "teacher", but "Lord". And she would spend a lifetime discovering and living the implications of that title, "Lord".

COSMIC HISTORY Her discovery that Jesus was alive not only affected her personal living, as it does ours, but it also connected her up with cosmic history.

How lamentable it is that the resurrection to many simply has to do with an individual's hope beyond the grave. Let it be remembered this hour that the

first Christians believed that what Jesus achieved in His death and resurrection had meaning for all of life -- for principalities and powers, and thrones and dominions. St. Paul affirmed that the whole of creation was like a woman in travail waiting for the fullness of redemption. Because the end did not come right away, Christians began to lose their vision of the cosmic meaning of the redemption of Jesus and settled instead for the hope of individual life beyond the grave. It is that, but it is more. There is a world that does not end. A kingdom that is irresistible, from which all of our little lesser worlds derive their meaning. The values embodied in that "One Solitary Life" - faith, hope and love...truth, goodness, beauty and forgiveness - all live.

WHY DO YOU WEEP

"Why do you weep?" Mary had the morning. Mary had the garden. Mary had the springtime. Still she wept. Mary even had the empty tomb. She saw the stone rolled away, ran to tell Peter and John, returned to the garden and stood outside the tomb continuing to weep. The empty tomb in and of itself proves nothing. It only raises questions about the body. Was it stolen. Where was it now? Not the empty tomb but the appearances of Jesus to His own restored their faith in him.

It wasn't until Mary heard her name pronounced in love by Jesus that her grief dissolved and her joy returned. She heard Him speak her name in love. That could happen to some of us today. Pray God it will.

CLOSING

Arnold Toynbee played his trained and able mind on history. Towards the end of his lifetime study, he gave us a survey of the saviours of the world:

"When we set out on this quest we found ourselves moving in the midst of a mighty host, but, as we have pressed forward, the marchers, company by company, have fallen out of the race.

The first to fail were the swordsmen, the next the archaists, and futurists, the next, the philosophers, until only gods were left in the munning. At the final ordeal of death, few, even of these would-be saviour gods, have dared to put their title to the test by plunging into the icy river.

And now, as we stand and gaze with our eyes fixed upon the farther shore, a single figure rises from the flood and straightway fills the whole horizon. There is the Saviour (Christ), 'and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand; he shall see of the travail of his soul and shall be satisfied.'"

PRAYER

"Bless us, dear God, with the gift of faith: that seeing, we may see, and hearing, we may hear.

Let the Gospel in all of its unbounded power, make us strong for life and death. In Christ, our Lord, we see life's highest hopes and in Him we find life's deepest meaning. Take our natural impulses and stretch them. In the spirit of the Ris'n Christ, we pray. Amen